

HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn looks at the life and legacy of Mother Teresa

HERO + HERETIC 25: MOTHER TERESA 1910-1997

How did a little nun become a Nobel Prize winner, the most admired person of the 20th century¹ and 'the greatest Indian' since Gandhi?² All these were bigger feats given that she was born Albanian, with the less memorable name Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu. She renamed herself after Therese of Lisieux, a role model for holiness through faithfulness in small things. But what started small, she grew to be one of the world's most recognisable

movements, with over 5000 Missionaries of Charity working in 139 countries.³ Her express aim was to make God known through acts of compassion:

*'No one thinks of the pen while reading a letter, they only want to know the mind of the person who wrote the letter. That's exactly what I am in God's hand. God is writing his love letter to the world in this way, through works of love'*⁴

redemptive suffering and the inner darkness

After a few months training in Dublin, in 1928, Teresa joined the community of Loreto in Calcutta (now Kolkata) to teach. The poverty left a deep impression. Teresa felt called to launch a new



Mother Teresa 1910-1997

IMAGE: PA

religious community (Missionaries of Charity) to respond to and 'quench the thirst of our Lord Jesus Christ for the salvation of souls'.⁵ This was to be achieved by a new vow 'to care for the poor and needy, abandoned, sick and dying who, crushed by want and destitution, live in conditions unworthy of human dignity...and performing services however mean and lowly they may appear'.⁶

She had a vision that God was especially present in the midst of the misery she witnessed: 'I have never seen

so much suffering – I only saw an open Calvary – where the passion of Christ was being relived in the bodies of crowds and crowds of people.'⁷ She believed that God meets us there: 'sorrow, suffering is but a kiss of Jesus – a sign that you have come so close to Jesus that He can kiss you...if you come close to the crown of thorns it will hurt you'.⁸ One patient found this a hard teaching: 'please tell Jesus to stop kissing me!' Evangelicals may be wary about the lack of distinction between the purpose of the suffering of Christ and the believer in Teresa's writing. However perhaps she exposed an unbiblical materialism in the West, that means we are surprised when adversity comes, and fail to see God's sovereign purposes in it.⁹



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Her own inner life darkened after she pioneered the new order. Previously she had known God's presence, union and love. Afterwards she felt 'convicting emptiness, coldness like ice so great that nothing touches my soul'.¹⁰ When her letters were published, this shocked her supporters, who had been impressed by her serenity and joy. She wrote that she wore 'cheerfulness as a cloak by which I cover my emptiness and misery'. She worried this was a deception, but resolved to live the joy she did not feel. God would be glorified through her ordeals: 'I will smile at your hidden face – always'. Some believe that this absence was a crisis of faith, others are reassured that Christian leaders are not immune from pain and doubt.¹¹



missionaries of charity building

interviewed her at the BBC, and was so captivated by her simplicity and generosity that he followed her to Calcutta.

His film *Something Beautiful For God* catapulted her to fame, and drew him eventually into the Catholic faith. 'The notion that there were too many children was to her as inconceivable as suggesting that there are too many bluebells in the woods... as she holds this child she

says in a voice and with an expression of exaltation most wonderful and moving 'See! There's life in her!' Her face is glowing and triumphant.'¹² When reflecting on whether her work was insignificant given the scale of the human need, he wrote that Christianity is not utilitarian, God's love is often disproportionate and unreasonable. For instance, 'there is more joy in heaven when one sinner repents than over ninety righteous people who do not need to repent.'¹³

end of life and early life care

Her ministry in India began in 1952, after a 13-year-old boy in Calcutta was turned away from a hospital, and died alone in the gutter. The story hit the press and pricked the conscience of a city overflowing with the destitute following the Partition of Bengal in 1947, with many living in abject poverty in 3,000 official slums. The Sisters were given a dormitory attached to the Hindu temple of Kali, goddess of death. It was a fitting place for the Sisters to attempt to provide a dignified death for 'people who lived like animals to die like angels', because they were within the sight of a loving face.

Teresa was passionate about the value of early life too, famously scooping the occasional abandoned baby out of a dustbin, however desperate their plight. Malcolm Muggeridge

the Nobel Prize for peace... and courage

Whilst many applauded the charitable work that nobody else would touch, Teresa was an unlikely candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize. Teresa taught that peace began with a loving word and a smile, but many couldn't see the connection with international diplomacy. She was finally awarded the Prize in 1978. Her iconic blue-edged sari was not ideally suited to the Norwegian frost, but she declined heavy fur coats, conceding only woollen socks inside her sandals. She asked for a concession of her own: that the banquet be cancelled and £12,000 donated to her fund for leprosy care. Her speech however was uncompromising:



*'And I feel one thing I want to share with you all, the greatest destroyer of peace today is the cry of the innocent unborn child. For if a mother can murder her own child in her womb, what is left for you and for me to kill each other? Even in the scripture it is written: "Even if mother could forget her child - I will not forget you - I have carved you in the palm of my hand." Even if mother could forget, but today millions of unborn children are being killed. And we say nothing... To me the nations who have legalized abortion, they are the poorest nations. They are afraid of the little one, they are afraid of the unborn child, and the child must die because they don't want to feed one more child, to educate one more child, the child must die.'*¹⁴



Mother Teresa, Tirana, Albania

She finally got to be an official peacemaker in 1982, when she became the unlikely negotiator for the evacuation of 38 handicapped children, trapped in the crossfire in a Beirut orphanage. She travelled widely, and once remarked 'if there are poor on the moon, we shall go there too'.¹⁶ Surely, one of her most satisfying trips must have been returning to Albania. It was only after the fall of communism in 1990 that religion was again legalised. (It is a delicious irony that the most famous citizen from the

world's first atheist state was a Catholic nun.) If you fly to Tirana today, you will fly into Airport Nënë Tereza. Her name is celebrated absolutely everywhere.

the greatest disease of all?

The world would catch up with her on another big issue: compassionate care for what she deemed the 'untouchables' of the West. She opened New York's first hospice for people dying from HIV/AIDS on Christmas Eve 1985. Teresa used her international fame wherever she could, even when it seemed hopeless.

When Teresa came to the West, she was shocked by a pathology she considered worse than leprosy or cancer: 'Being unwanted is the greatest disease of all'.¹⁵ She was saddened by the neglect of the elderly in care homes, who she witnessed watching the door for visitors, without hope. In the UK, a prosperous country that did so much to support her, the homeless living in 'cardboard coffins' shocked her. She was moved to set up a service for those discharged too early from psychiatric hospitals.

no stained glass saint

Mother Teresa died in 1997, and was canonised in 2015, meaning the Vatican declared her a saint. Witnesses testified that prayers offered to Teresa and contact with her medallion immediately cured a woman with abdominal masses.¹⁷ This raises the question of what defines a saint,¹⁸ who prayers should be addressed to, and how miracles are verified.

Critics have also complained that Mother Teresa was so idolised that the public were blind to her flaws. In particular, Christopher Hitchens made a damning documentary in 1994, entitled *Hell's Angel*.¹⁹ It was typical of Hitchens' polemical style to provoke and exaggerate, but perhaps only he would raise the difficult issues about medical standards, financial probity, political affiliation and aid tied to conversion. These are important issues for many Christian charities today.

should a Christian charity have secular outcome targets?

The Lancet ran an article raising concerns about

how medically appropriate her service was.²⁰ For instance, the Sisters had an impressive ethic of touching the untouchable. However, infection control policies are needed, especially for intravenous equipment. And was there a strategy to identify patients who needed referral for treatment that was more than palliative? Critics claimed that her view of the value of suffering was a disincentive to seeking optimal medical care. But at least she was providing basic care for the utterly destitute, who had often been entirely excluded from healthcare.

should a Christian charity be 'political'?

Aid agencies are inevitably confronted with the challenge of whether they should be addressing the causes of poverty as much as the consequences. Teresa was accused of making pacts with various dictators in Haiti and Albania to gain access. Was it her job to 'afflict the comfortable' as much as she comforted the afflicted? Was she legitimising the failure of governments or romanticising poverty?

did the Sisters coerce deathbed conversions?

One of the most serious accusations was that the Sisters conducted non-consenting deathbed conversions. Dying patients were certainly offered a prayer of blessing. Teresa wrote that conversion was the 'changing of the heart by love'.²¹ This might suggest that the Sisters would have considered it inappropriate spiritual care to coerce someone with limited capacity into faith or attach conditions to care. But it's hard to assess allegations of this sort with certainty.

In contrast, some evangelicals have accused her of being a universalist,²² teaching that everyone will ultimately be saved, because she would seek common ground with those of other faiths. It is worth remembering the delicate political situation she faced in pluralistic India. A mob once came to the House of the Dying to shut down what was seen as a threat to local religion. The leader entered and

INSPIRING EXAMPLES OF MOTHER TERESA

- Costly service to the world's poorest and untouchables
- Courage in speaking up for the unborn
- Discernment in seeing the West's spiritual poverty
- Launching a sustainable worldwide movement

was impressed at how the Sisters tended maggot-ridden wounds, and a young Hindu priest was cleaned up from vomit and filth. He returned to the mob and promised to evict the nuns on one condition: that they persuade their mothers and sisters to undertake the same work. The crowd dispersed and did not return.²³

It is a theme of this *Nucleus* series that few heroes are as infallible as their myths portray. But Teresa wrote that ultimately she wanted her life to point away from herself – an aim worthy of any Christian hero: '*there stands one thing very clear – my weakness and his greatness. I fear all things from my weakness – but I trust blindly his greatness.*' ■

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